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ABSTRACT

In response to legislative mandate, the Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges initiated the development of a community college accountability system by convening a task force in January 1991. In addition, grants were awarded to four community college districts (i.e., Mt. San Antonio College, San Joaquin Delta College, San Jose-Evergreen, and Santa Barbara City College) to develop prototype accountability reports. The task force was assigned the role of consultant in the planning and development of three components of the accountability system: the districts' pilot projects; a guide designed to assist colleges in implementing accountability programs; and a systemwide accountability indicators report. This final report of the task force provides an overview of all of the activities undertaken during the program planning stages, including a study of state and local costs of the accountability system commissioned by the Chancellor's Office, and offers recommendations concerning the system's implementation. Highlighted recommendations underscore the importance of locating funds to: (1) improve the capacity of colleges to conduct institutional research and develop management information systems; (2) implement the statewide plan described in the cost study; and (3) improve college and Chancellor's Office access to statewide employment and transfer databases. Appendixes provide summaries of the pilot districts' projects, and an outline of the 18 systemwide accountability indicators related to student access, success, and satisfaction; staff composition; and fiscal condition. (MPH)

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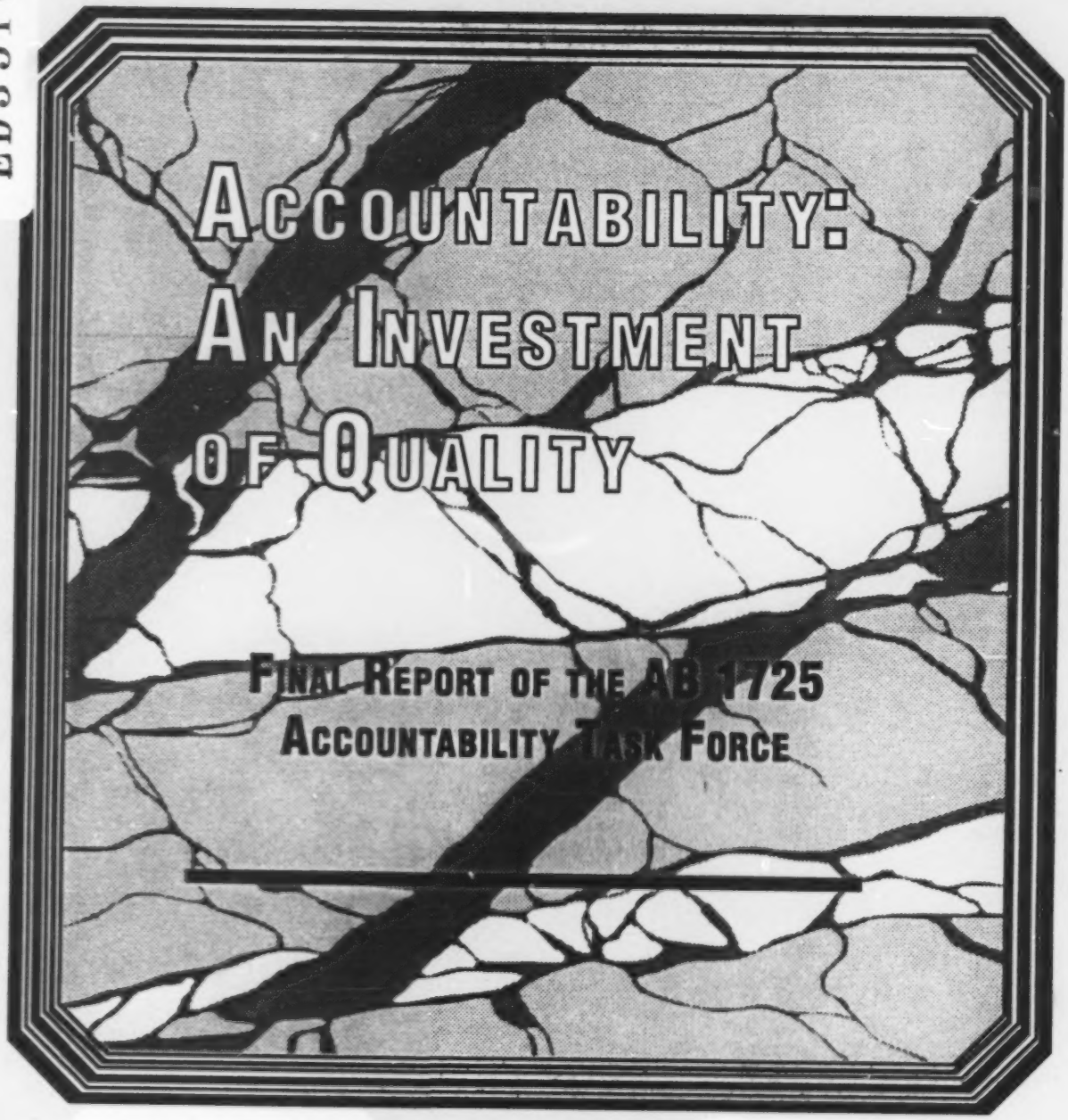


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# ACCOUNTABILITY: AN INVESTMENT OF QUALITY

## FINAL REPORT OF THE AB 1725 ACCOUNTABILITY TASK FORCE

A PUBLICATION OF

CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES
CHANCELLOR'S OFFICE
1107 NINTH STREET
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POLICY ANALYSIS AND DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

AUGUST 1992

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# Accountability: An Investment of Quality

# Final Report of the AB 1725 Accountability Task Force

## Executive Summary

The California Community Colleges are vital to California's social and economic health, especially at this time of high unemployment, urban violence, expanding linguistic and cultural diversity, and rapid population growth. Community college education is an indispensable solution, whether for jobs, transfer to four-year colleges, instruction in English as a second language, or the acquisition of basic skills needed to succeed in college. Because the community colleges are so valuable to California, it is also important to adequately provide for their needs and continual improvement.

Reduced state funding, increasing unfunded student enrollments, and sharpened competition for dollars with other government programs now threaten the quality of the California Community Colleges. While the average citizen may highly value her own local community college, she is less likely to be content with the system as a whole. There are lingering perceptions of students who cannot get courses they need, who take frivolous courses, who do not pay back loans, and who do not succeed in either the workplace or after transfer to four-year institutions. Reliable information is essential to correct wrong perceptions and to make improvements where necessary. An accountability program, by documenting the condition of the colleges, strengthens the public trust in how tax dollars are spent and forges a strong argument for continued investment.

California's Legislature has required the development of a community college accountability system (*Education Code* Section 71020.5). In January 1991, the Chancellor's Office began an accountability pilot program by convening a task force and awarding grants to community college districts. The Chancellor asked the task force to consult on developing local prototype accountability reports, a guide to assist colleges to implement accountability programs, and a systemwide accountability indicators report. The task force completed its assigned tasks in June 1992.

## Local Accountability

The awarded grants permitted the development of locally-oriented accountability reports. The local projects provided a framework to integrate planning, research, administration, and instruction. The funds enabled the hiring of technicians, the development of hardware and software systems, and facilitated participation at various conferences and planning sessions. The pilot program demonstrated that local accountability programs can benefit colleges' efforts to assess and enhance effectiveness. The work of the four colleges verified their capability to assess effectiveness and to design strategies for institutional improvement. The pilot program also demonstrated that meaningful accountability or effectiveness programs require substantial amounts of time and expertise; however, the resources to satisfy these requirements are beyond the capabilities of many colleges.

The technical assistance guide, "Improving It: Accountability by Design," [1] offers guidelines for educators who wish to design systems for improved institutional productivity and effectiveness at local community colleges. This booklet advocates that colleges should view accountability as an opportunity to verify to themselves and others what their institutions are accomplishing and to design ways to monitor and ensure continued success. The guide is not prescriptive; it helps institutions evaluate their capability to assess their effectiveness, and it poses design issues that staff will need to decide for themselves. In particular, the scope of an accountability and institutional effectiveness program should take into account the resources and expertise available to a college. This guide will benefit colleges that wish to develop the means to assess their effectiveness.

## Statewide Accountability

A primary finding of the pilot program is that a viable accountability program must address both state and local needs. At the local college level, accountability means institutional effectiveness and continually improving student teaching and learning. At the state level, it involves the need to base policy and funding on objective, defensible information. The state accountability program relies on information provided by local colleges; the commitment to develop quality information will depend on whether colleges believe that the program meets valid state needs and has local utility.

To assess the capability of the California Community Colleges to move this accountability program forward, the Chancellor's Office commissioned a cost study, "California Community College Accountability: State and Local Implementation Costs." [2] The study describes four obstacles that need to be considered: (1) great variance in local management information system capabilities, (2) uneven local research competence, (3) local skepticism regarding accountability, and (4) a patchwork of existing statewide reporting requirements.

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1. Mills, S., Amsler, M., and Kirsch, K. (1991). San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research.
2. Hayward, G., Shimasaki, D., Koppich, J., Guthrie, J., and Plecki, M. (1991). Berkeley: Strategic Planning Associates.

The strategy for overcoming these obstacles focuses on building a statewide program that includes five components with appropriate budgetary support: a statewide accountability indicators report, in-depth accountability studies, statewide surveys of student satisfaction and long-term success, elimination of unnecessary data collection, and an information clearinghouse.

## Next Steps

What comes next, now that the framework for an accountability program is complete? The task force is acutely aware of California's very difficult fiscal situation. It is the Community College System's key role in easing California's social and economic problems that now makes accountability so important. Gains in college effectiveness and strengthened public trust will amply repay the relatively small amount of funding needed for accountability.

Three essential recommendations emanated from the pilot program. These recommendations are to seek funding to:

- Improve the capacity of colleges for institutional research and management information system activities that are necessary for accountability and institutional effectiveness.
- Implement the statewide plan described in the cost study.
- Improve college and Chancellor's Office access to statewide data bases that contain employment and transfer information.

Accountability for the community colleges is more than just a legal requirement: What society most values it also measures and studies in order to preserve and enhance. To embrace accountability exhibits a deep moral obligation to the welfare of the community colleges; it is all too easy and expedient to evade this obligation. To fail in this way is to take the wrong path, to disappoint the public trust, and to miss the opportunity to better serve all of California's students who now, more than ever, need a good education.

# Accountability: An Investment of Quality

## Final Report of the AB 1725 Accountability Pilot Program

Assembly Bill 1725 (Chapter 973, Statutes of 1988, *Education Code* Section 71020.5) mandates that ". . . the Board of Governors shall develop and implement a comprehensive community college educational and fiscal accountability system . . ." to improve the quality of student and institutional performance. The Board of Governors shall implement the system over a three-year period, beginning not later than 1991-92, and shall produce a published report of community college accountability.

Initial planning called for centralized collection and reporting of information in five areas: student access, student success, student satisfaction, staff composition, and fiscal condition. State-level goals were public disclosure and systemwide planning, policy, and budget formulation. Local colleges would report the required information to the Board of Governors, which would then prepare and issue a report. In January 1991, the Chancellor's Office convened a task force and awarded grants to four community college districts (see Appendix A). The Chancellor asked the task force to consult on developing local prototype accountability reports, a technical guide that would assist colleges to implement accountability programs, and a systemwide accountability program.

### Local Accountability

**Pilot District Results.** The pilot program awarded $375,000 in grants to four community college districts. The colleges were competitively selected for their commitment to local accountability and effectiveness, as well as their data processing and research capabilities.

The Chancellor's Office designed the pilot program grants to benefit districts in developing local accountability and effectiveness programs. The grants provided a framework for integrating planning, research, administrative, and teaching activities. The pilot districts obtained trustee support early on and kept their boards informed. Other stakeholders, including administrators, students, and faculty, helped to identify needed information. The grants permitted the hiring of technical staff and the development of hardware and software systems.

The grants also enabled pilot districts to share their progress and obtain feedback at various conferences and meetings, including meetings of the task force, pilot district collaborative planning meetings, Association of California Community Colleges Administrators conferences, Community College League of California annual conferences and research conferences, the Association for the Advancement of Higher Education conference, Academic Senate conferences, the Annual Meeting of the American Educational

Research Association, and the Chancellor's Office Student Services conference, as well as workshops or meetings sponsored by the Northern California Institutional Research Association, the Southern California Community College Institutional Research Association, Chabot-Las Positas Community College District, the Vocational Education Committee of Practitioners, the Adult Education Steering Committee, and the Council of Organizations.

**Improvement Guide for Local Districts.** The experiences of the pilot colleges are the basis for a technical assistance guide, "Improving It: Accountability by Design," which the Chancellor's Office has shared with local college leadership. The guide envisions accountability as a way for colleges to verify to themselves and others what they are accomplishing and to design ways to monitor and ensure continued success. A basic insight is that the system should serve the needs of both the state and the college: The state needs information to assess the attainment of the mission established for the California Community Colleges; the institution needs information to define its achievement and determine where and how to improve teaching, learning, and student support. The guide describes various implementation issues that illustrate this vision of useful local programs.

> **Leadership.** A strong accountability system requires strong leadership. College leaders must commit to its value and importance. Leadership is key in developing an appropriate vision of the accountability process. Leaders must pose essential questions: Who is responsible for what? What is to be accomplished? What necessary resources will be made available? How will the institution know if goals have been met?
>
> **Access to information.** Access to information is vital to the design of an effective accountability process. In an open system, important data would be shared with all sectors of the campus because information is viewed as important to all the members of the college community. . . . [G]roups not included in the information-access loop cannot be held accountable for decisions that are made.
>
> **Stakeholders.** Who should be included in the accountability loop? . . . A narrow definition of stakeholders can limit the effectiveness of the accountability process. Most administrators would agree that buy-in and participation of campus stakeholders is desirable. Colleges will differ, however, about who to include and to what degree information should be shared.
>
> **Compliance vs. Internal Use.** Reporting must be seen as a tool clearly linked to internal decisionmaking. If viewed solely as complying with the demands of external agencies, such as the Legislature or the Chancellor's Office, then there will be no impetus to make links to such vital institutional activities as planning and resource allocation. To be motivated to invest enough time to develop an effective accountability system, institutional stakeholders must perceive such a system as central to the health of their college. They must be convinced that the system will not be burdensome to operate and that it will help them function better.

Some community colleges are better prepared than others to implement accountability systems. They differ considerably in vision, availability of information, technology, stakeholder support, sophistication

of program review, and accreditation self-study. The design framework recognizes three levels of readiness: basic, intermediate, and advanced, depending on the degree of sophistication and use of accountability data. The framework suggests useful entry points for designing systems that are appropriate to local capabilities and needs. As the system matures from a basic to a more advanced state, a college should find its data more useful for improving teaching and learning.

## STATEWIDE ACCOUNTABILITY

**The Statewide Cost Study.** The design guide helped to produce a consensus that local programs not only can benefit colleges but also can improve the quality of information submitted to the Chancellor's Office. If this is true, what are the main issues in designing the state's accountability program? This type of question prompted a study, "California Community College Accountability: State and Local Implementation Costs," commissioned by the Chancellor's Office. The authors interviewed officials of the Chancellor's Office, the Office of the Legislative Analyst, the Department of Finance, the California Postsecondary Education Commission, and the Accountability Task Force, as well as pilot district staff and key individuals at ten other community college districts not directly involved in the accountability project. The Chancellor's Office shared this study with local superintendents and/or presidents, the Board of Governors, and appropriate state administrators and staff.

The study set out to make recommendations regarding the implementation of a statewide accountability program. It ended up focusing on a more critical issue: the system's readiness for implementation. Although some colleges, with appropriate funding, could meaningfully participate in an accountability and institutional effectiveness program, many others are not yet ready to do so. Four obstacles emerged from the study: (1) disparity in the utilization of management information systems among the colleges, (2) uneven local researchcapabilities, (3) local perception of state requirements, and (4) a patchwork of existing statewide accountability requirements.

The great diversity in management information system capability grew out of California's highly decentralized community college governance system. Various mainframes used at colleges include Hewlett-Packard, UNISYS, Burroughs, and IBM, as well as other less popular brands. The type of software used by colleges depends, of course, on the available hardware; the applications, whether administrative or for research; and the type of access (decentralized "hands-on" or centralized "at a distance") granted to users. Some colleges contract out for data processing services, others develop in-house resources.

Institutional research functions across colleges were even more disparate than management information systems. At some colleges, research consisted of simplistic arraying of data for reports, with slight emphasis on assessment, analysis, or evaluation. In a few colleges, institutional research is a part of planning and other decisionmaking activities. Colleges cited State and federal reporting requirements, with little local utility, as one reason for lack of sophistication of institutional research offices. The burden of meeting these external requirements detracted from investment in locally useful research capacity. Ironically, external reporting appeared to reduce colleges' access to data. State and federal agencies have not been able to provide easy access to data, nor is it submitted to colleges in formats that are locally useful, and many colleges do not have the resources to do it on their own.

Colleges mentioned the confusion and multiplicity of already existing "accountability" requirements as one obstacle to implementing the mandated accountability system. The Chancellor's Office already requires compliance reporting for matriculation assessment, disabled students, the economically disadvantaged, vocational education, and student aid. These uncoordinated reporting requirements hamper many colleges from pursuing a more comprehensive accountability strategy.

College staff described various, deeply-rooted perceptions that mitigate against any new comprehensive accountability program. While the study did not examine the causes of these perceptions, it did, however, recognize that peoples' feelings do influence behavior, citing, for example:

- Promises that submitted data would be accessible and useful have been broken.
- An overload of information requests that have no discernible, useful purpose has resulted in a lack of commitment to data quality.
- There are too many uncoordinated duplicate requests for information from various units within the Chancellor's Office.
- Fear that data might be used to make unfair or unsound comparisons between colleges, complicating the already difficult task of managing institutions.

The cost study found that colleges recognized the importance of locally useful programs. State-level accountability is also seen as a political necessity. The study recommended a program with five components to help build state and local capacity for accountability and to overcome the uncovered problems: produce a statewide accountability indicators report; conduct in-depth accountability studies; periodically conduct sample surveys of long-term student satisfaction, transfer to senior institutions, and job placement; systematically eliminate all duplicative and redundant information requests; and, provide a clearinghouse for technical assistance to colleges.

**Statewide Accountability Indicators.** Recommendations for statewide accountability indicators emerged from dialogue with the pilot task force and districts, interested Chancellor's Office staff, and the California Postsecondary Education Commission. The report format contains eighteen indicators that represent the condition of the California Community Colleges (see Appendix B). Included are student outcomes, and the input, process, and contextual information essential for understanding these outcomes. The Chancellor's Office should rely primarily on existing sources, e.g., the statewide management information system, to develop this statewide report.

The selection of indicators was governed by the intended audience for the report, that is, the Board of Governors, the California Postsecondary Education Commission, the Legislature, and the Governor. Individual colleges may augment the statewide indicators with local indicators that will provide more meaningful and useful descriptions of local conditions. Additional indicators for the statewide report will be considered if warranted by changes in the California Community Colleges.

## NEXT STEPS

Now that the framework for an accountability program is complete, what comes next? The task force is acutely aware of California's very difficult fiscal situation. The California Community Colleges key role in easing California's social and economic problems makes accountability important. The relatively small amount of funding needed for accountability will be amply repaid by gains in college effectiveness and strengthened public trust.

Three essential recommendations emanated from the pilot program:

1. Seek funding to improve the capacity of colleges for institutional research and management information system activities that are necessary for accountability and institutional effectiveness. The collection, analysis, and productive use of information are time consuming and labor intensive. Equally important, the quality of data collected by the Chancellor's Office depends on the technical capabilities of local colleges. There are two areas of need—research and management information.

    - Research. Devising indicators, understanding and manipulating data, and using technology to display results require professional knowledge of measurement and statistical analysis. These technical tasks demand specialized professional services. A large number of colleges do not have this expertise and need to acquire it.

    - Management Information. The core of an adequate accountability system is a large body of continually updated data on the college's basic operations. This data base should be longitudinal to examine trends, and it should permit appropriate comparative analyses. To assemble and manipulate such data requires that the college have sophisticated technology and professionally trained staff. Again, many colleges are without this level of capability and will need to acquire it.

    A main goal is to develop a sound, flexible information infrastructure that will then be useful to practitioners and policymakers. Experience suggests developing this infrastructure by phases.

2. Provide funding to implement the statewide plan. Specific actions include the following:

    a. Produce a statewide accountability indicators report. This report forms the core of a system to provide basic accountability information, not only to the Board of Governors, the Legislature, and the Governor, but also to colleges. This report should provide for the display of statewide trends. New indicators should be added as changes in the California Community Colleges require. The bulk of information in this report comes from the Chancellor's Office Management Information System. Information on student satisfaction, transfer, and job placement requires additional funding for acquisition.

b. Eliminate unnecessary data collection and improve policy coherence. Most new reporting requirements are additive; it is very hard to eliminate existing reporting requirements, even if they are no longer useful. This signifies an underlying need for a comprehensive policy audit at the state level. Too often policies develop piecemeal and end up imposing contradictory incentives for institutional behavior. The cleanup of data collection practices first requires providing for more coherent overall policies.

c. Establish a clearinghouse for technical assistance. While some colleges do have advanced research and technological capabilities, many others do not. The Chancellor's Office should operate a clearinghouse to facilitate the development and sharing of knowledge about "what works" among colleges. For example:

   Δ The Chancellor's Office should annually contract with a limited number of qualified colleges for the further development of model accountability and institutional effectiveness practices. The Chancellor's Office should disseminate the products systemwide.

   Δ Action-oriented workshops for local leadership are needed. Documents alone will not motivate colleges. Trustees, superintendents and/or presidents, faculty senate presidents, and student presidents are crucial to the success of local institutional effectiveness programs.

   Δ Help colleges to exploit resources that are readily available. An initial, low-cost step is to publish a newsletter to inform colleges of existing resources for the development of local accountability and institutional effectiveness programs.

d. Facilitate in-depth reporting. The statewide accountability indicators report, taken by itself, is just an array of numbers. To become useful for policymakers, administrators, and the public, relationships among the indicators must be analyzed and explained. Understanding outcomes requires a grasp of context, inputs, and educational processes. Each year, the Chancellor's Office should facilitate a contracted study, collaboratively planned by colleges and interested state agencies, of one of the five main accountability areas. The results should be reported to the Board of Governors.

e. Conduct statewide surveys of long-term student success and satisfaction. Scientifically designed surveys using samples of students are a cost-effective way of conducting in-depth research. Large relational data bases cannot readily handle the detailed qualitative and quantitative information required for the penetrating analysis of student employment, transfer, and satisfaction.

3. The Chancellor's Office should facilitate college access to systemwide data that describe UC, CSU, and independent college transfer activity, as well as labor market and employment trends.

While the pilot districts developed a considerable amount of information with the help of the grants, many other colleges do not have the resources necessary to create or use such systems. Efforts are now underway to strengthen the California Community Colleges capability to provide employment and transfer information. The Chancellor's Office is participating in a pilot project with the Employment Development Department and two local colleges to access unemployment insurance wage records. Also underway is a large-scale transfer-rate study[3] involving a number of colleges that will directly draw information from UC and CSU on student transfers. This study intends to produce valid transfer statistics that are accepted statewide. An outcome intended from both of these efforts is that the California Community Colleges and local colleges will have timely and valid information sufficient to assess the effectiveness of transfer and vocational students.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

As long as public concern about student outcomes abides, and competition for funds is unabated, there will be legislative interest in accountability and institutional effectiveness programs. It is difficult to fault a desire to make better decisions using appropriate information or to strive to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A risk is that the reporting of a few numbers will foster a one-dimensional, unrealistic view of education. Of course, educators and the public must realize that the task of accountability is not to provide simplistic descriptions. At its best, by entertaining diverse points of view, building up a detailed composite picture, accountability can help us to see the essential richness of community college education.

Accountability for the community colleges is more than just a legal requirement: What society most values it also measures and studies in order to preserve and enhance. To embrace accountability exhibits a deep moral obligation to the welfare of the community colleges; it is all too easy and expedient to evade this obligation. To fail in this way is to take the wrong path, to disappoint the public trust, and to miss the opportunity to better serve all of California's students who now, more than ever, need a good education.

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3. Berman and Weiler Associates, Berkeley, California.

# APPENDIX A

## PILOT DISTRICT SUMMARIES

**Mt. San Antonio College** in Los Angeles County has a single campus serving about 32,000 students (46% White, 28% Hispanic, 11% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 8% Black). It has an Office of Institutional Research and an Information Services office. Highlights of the Mt. San Antonio project are the development of satisfaction surveys in numerous service areas and the analysis of census data tapes. The local measures of effectiveness fit into the college's fifteen-year planning and evaluation cycle, and the annual operational review and assessment program. Particular features of the program are an emphasis on longitudinal studies of student outcomes, the development of techniques for automating surveys, and improved procedures for accessing large mainframe computer data bases.

**San Joaquin Delta College** has a single campus of about 19,000 students (60% White, 19% Asian or Pacific Islander, 15% Hispanic, and 6% Black) in the city of Stockton, serving an area with strong agricultural interests. An Institutional Research and Planning office conducts research. Delta has one of the most advanced campus data processing systems in California, providing easy access and user-friendly services to administrators, faculty, and students. Significant features of Delta's program are the sophisticated comparisons of its performance with that of other selected colleges and the state, and the development of highly effective graphical displays.

**San Jose-Evergreen** has two campuses and a central office, located in the metropolitan San Francisco Bay area. The combined enrollment is about 20,000—with a minority of white students and Latinos and Asians making up about 40 percent of the student body. The dean of Academic Standards and Matriculation is responsible for research. This project features the development of a detailed demographic data base and the production of maps and reports portraying trends important for district planning.

**Santa Barbara City College** has one campus with about 12,000 credit students (68% White, 21% Hispanic, 8% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2% Black). A district research committee, with broad representation throughout the college, coordinates research. A major feature is the use of faculty release time to develop reports that are useful for faculty planning and development efforts. The project coordinates with a variety of ongoing projects, including accreditation self-study, development of a Statement of Institutional Directions, ongoing planning processes, program review, matriculation, and staff development. Institutional change requires a focus on programs and the people who work in them. Santa Barbara developed procedures for making accountability information accessible at the program level and linking it to review processes and goals. The involvement of faculty helped in the refinement of curriculum.

# APPENDIX B

## STATEWIDE ACCOUNTABILITY INDICATORS

The Statewide Accountability Indicators Report, outlined below, is designed to satisfy the requirements of AB 1725. The primary audiences for this report are the Board of Governors, the Legislature, and the Governor. While there are many other potentially interesting measures, the selected indicators reflect college characteristics related to desired student outcomes, as outlined in legislation and the mission of the California Community Colleges.

Individual local colleges are encouraged to augment this list at their option to measure any other particular local needs and conditions.

I. Student access
   - A. General participation
   - B. Transition from high school
   - C. Financial aid
   - D. Categorical programs
   - E. Basic skills and credit ESL enrollment

II. Student success
   - A. Persistence
   - B. Completion
   - C. Transfer
   - D. Job placement

III. Student satisfaction
   - A. Access
   - B. Instruction
   - C. Instructional services
   - D. Student services
   - E. Facilities

IV. Staff composition
   - A. Staff diversity
   - B. Faculty time assignment

V. Fiscal condition
   - A. Community college funding
   - B. Fiscal stability

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